

KHRUSHCHEV FOLLOWS STALIN'S FOOTSTEPS

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In February 1956 First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev revealed to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Moscow some of the appalling truths of Stalin's regime. He described the bloody purges, the false confessions extorted by torture, the illegal trials and executions carried out without trial, the deportation of thousands, the persecution of minorities, the exploitation of the peasantry, and the degradation of writers, artists, historians, and intellectuals. He ascribed this ghastly record to the fact that Stalin encouraged the cult of his own personality and the glorification of himself as an infallible and indispensable leader.

The list of crimes seems too long and too dreadful to be attributed to this one failing of the dictator. And, indeed, it is. Stalin did not pile up such a record of injustice, murder and genocide by himself. He had the assistance of his close associates in the top Kremlin hierarchy, who for their own selfish purposes helped to create and foster the cult of Stalinism. How this was accomplished was a lesson indelibly impressed upon at least one of his subordinates--Khrushchev, the present absolute ruler of the USSR.

After Stalin's rule of terror, Soviet citizens of every class had reason to breathe a sigh of relief when Khrushchev promised that the cult of personality and its attendant horrors would be condemned and eradicated. But the period of relief was a short-lived one. The factors which permitted Stalin to make himself an absolute dictator--the gathering of all sources of power in his own hands, the elimination of all rivals, the image of himself as the infallible leader--have now been employed by Khrushchev to advance himself to the same position.

There are striking similarities in the rise to power of both men. Stalin, at the time of Lenin's death in January 1924, was one of a group of Lenin's co-workers and heirs, as

Khrushchev was one of the "collective leadership" proclaimed after Stalin's death. In a series of political maneuvers, during which Stalin took full advantage of the fears and jealousies of his associates, he gradually eliminated all other contenders for the role of supreme leader. Stalin moved first against Trotsky, the most brilliant and most likely successor among Lenin's heirs. Allying himself with two other members of the Politbureau, Zinoviev and Kamenev, Stalin forced Trotsky first to resign as Commissar of War and then in 1926 to leave the Politbureau. The following year Trotsky was expelled from the Party and exiled.

After disposing of Trotsky, Stalin turned against his former allies, Zinoviev and Kamenev, who then were expelled from the Party and exiled to Siberia. During this period he had the support of Bukharin, leader of the Communist International, Rykov, Premier of the Soviet Government, and Tomsky, trade union leader. By 1929, however, all three were demoted and sent into exile or insignificant positions. Five years after Lenin's death, Stalin's ascendancy was complete.

It is worthy of attention that during this early climb to power, Stalin's rivals suffered no worse fate than dismissal or exile. It was not until 1936 that he dared to have Trotsky condemned to death and not until 1940--16 years after the struggle for power began--that Trotsky was murdered. The blood purges which eliminated all the other members of Lenin's Politbureau and 70 per cent of Army officers above the rank of colonel began only in the mid-thirties.

When Lenin died Stalin was General Secretary of the Central Committee. This post was intended to coordinate the work of the leading bodies of the Party and to serve as a link between the Politbureau and the Central Control Commission, the supreme court of appeal for those accused of offenses against the Party. In effect Stalin made himself the boss of the Party machine and the chief conductor of the purges. Khrushchev's road to power closely paralleled that of the older dictator. After Stalin's death in March 1953, he was transferred from the post of Secretary of the Moscow Committee to the Central Committee Secretariat, which Malenkov headed

as First Secretary. Nine days later, Malenkov was relieved of the post and Khrushchev was named chief of the five-man Secretariat.

He used this post exactly as Stalin had done to gain control of the Party machine and to pack it with his own followers. Again following Stalin's pattern, he eliminated all rival claimants to the position of supreme leader. Beria, Minister of Internal Affairs and chief of the secret police, was the first target. In a series of lightening moves which would have done credit to the old master himself, Beria was arrested, charged with acting as an "agent" of foreign imperialists, found guilty and shot. During the course of the next two years, nine of his associates in the secret police followed him down the road to oblivion.

With the support of Marshal Zhukov and the army, Khrushchev first ousted Malenkov as Premier in February 1955 and, at the Central Committee Plenum in June 1957, smashed the opposition forces headed by Malenkov, Molotov, Kaganovich and Shepilov. All were demoted to insignificant jobs--the first three went to Siberia, and Shepilov remained in Moscow as a school teacher. Four months later Zhukov, the last remaining rival who could threaten Khrushchev's assumption of the role of supreme leader, was deposed as Minister of Defense. Four years after Stalin's death, Khrushchev stood unchallenged at the top of the power pyramid, Stalin's undeniable heir and successor.

Accounts of recent meetings of Soviet officials leave no doubt that Khrushchev is building around himself the cult of the infallible and omnipotent leader. As early as the 20th Party Congress in 1956, Khrushchev was visibly "more equal" than the other members of the hierarchy. From the Opening Address to the Closing Address (both delivered by Khrushchev), all important business was handled by the First Secretary. Only Khrushchev received an ovation from the delegates who rose in his honor.

By the plenary session of the Soviet Party Central Committee on 15 December 1958 the glorification of Khrushchev was already well advanced. Nearly every speaker praised him

in extravagant terms. According to one major speech, the outstanding event in the life of the people was the acceptance of Khrushchev's agricultural policies at the September 1953 central committee plenum. Thanks were expressed to Khrushchev for teaching the nation how to grow corn, to raise ducks, and to breed sheep. Khrushchev's suppression of the "anti-party" group headed by Malenkov, Molotov and Kaganovich was hailed as a victory of "good" over "evil." One delegate declared, "I was amazed at the great work, the will power, the patience, and the decisiveness which Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev displayed when he struggled against the anti-party group and resolutely routed out their anti-party intrigues."

Khrushchev dominated the meeting, giving the opening and closing addresses and frequently interrupting speakers to make corrections, ask questions, and give advice. Some of the speeches in fact appeared to be little more than prepared dialogues between Khrushchev and the speaker arranged in order to give Khrushchev an opportunity to show off his expertise in all fields of agricultural production.

A week later a speech by Polyansky, a member of the Presidium and Premier of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic, hailed the First Secretary as having, as no one else had, "contact with life, with people,...that enables him to raise and solve correctly--together with...the Central Committee of the party--the most complicated problems arising from life itself, to have clear foresight, to work out new aspects of the theory and practice of Communist building." This endeavor to picture Khrushchev as a Marxist theoretician leading the country "along the Leninist path" is a further step in the creation of a leader image similar to that invented for Lenin and Stalin.

The 21st Party Congress which opened in January 1959 carried the process a step further. In an outpouring of praise, Khrushchev was credited for every Soviet achievement from the successful Lunik to the rise in agricultural production. His status as a theoretician, the worthy successor of Marx, Engels and Lenin was affirmed. The "anti-party" group was castigated again, symbolizing the uselessness and danger of opposing Khrushchev. The re-writing of history, a convenient Stalinist invention to put the blame for failures on the

defeated, was revived when Iosif I. Kuzman, chief economic planner, reported that problems in electric power development were the fault of the "anti-party group."

Some students of the USSR have pointed out that Khrushchev's rise to power has been comparatively bloodless,--only Beria and his followers have been liquidated,--and that Khrushchev is therefore a more "liberal" ruler than his predecessor. However, in view of the fact that Khrushchev has attained his goal even more swiftly than did Stalin and that he has disposed of all rivals even more expeditiously, it would seem the part of unbounded optimism to believe it. The corruption that comes with absolute power is already visible.